DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 589 CS 209 402

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TITLE Beginning Writing: Characteristics of Development.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (33rd, Austin, TX, November 29-December 3, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; *Child Language; Language Acquisition; Primary Education; Writing (Composition); *Writing Processes; *Writing Research; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Beginning Writing

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to identify characteristics of young children's written compositions that might be used to indicate growth patterns. Written compositions of 482 children of all ability levels, grades 1-3, were examined by two teams of teacher-researchers and placed on a continuum of sophistication. Four growth strands were identified: (1) readiness, in which the children learned that language can convey a message; (2) sentence, in which children began to string words together to form sentences; (3) description, in which children learned to use a series of sentences to describe something; and (4) beginning discourse, in which five elements showing growth developed. These elements were the increase in sentence length and variety, the increase in concern for logical relationships, the increase in descriptive language, the use of story structure, and the recognition of audience awareness. While a sequence of patterns and growth strands appeared, these patterns did not occur in smooth transitions. Awareness of the importance of errors to growth in writing should help teachers to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages experimentation. The growth strands can be used as guidelines for teachers as they examine compositions over a period of time and and communicate with parents and administrators about written language growth. (EL)

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ED263589

BEGINNING WRITING:
CHARACTERISTICS OF DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to identify characteristics of young children's written compositions which might be used to indicate growth patterns. Written compositions of 482 children of all ability levels, grades 1-3, were collected. Using current research from areas of language development, development of written language, discourse analysis and cognitive development, the compositions were grouped on a continuum of sophistication. The researchers were able to identify four growth strands: readiness, sentence, description and beginning discourse strands. Developmental characteristics within the latter strand included sentence variety, logical relationships (cohesion), descriptive language structure of discourse and audience awareness.

BEGINNING WRITING: CHARACTERISTICS OF DEVELOPMENT

One of the major objectives of education is to teach children to communicate effectively in writing. Public concern mounts because this goal does not seem to be accomplished. Recent research into the acquisition of the writing process (Clay, 1975; Read, 1975; Calkins, 1980; Graves, 1982; Ferreiro, 1981) has provided new important insights; however, characteristics which can be used to indicate children's growth as writers are not clearly defined. It is clear that characteristics such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization and legibility are no longer acceptable because effective writing is determined by the ability to express ideas. Yet, teachers, parents and administrators do not have patterns that might be used to follow growth. Identification of growth indicators, were they available, could be used to follow children's writing development and to provide suggestions for instructional conferences and activities which teachers might use to stimulate growth in writing.

Research from a variety of sources indicates that while children come to school as competent language users (Menyuk,1969; Cazden, 1972; Halliday, 1973), their language continues to develop through the elementary years (Chomsky, 1969; Olds, 1968; Ingram, 1975; Clark and Clark, 1977). Hunt(1977),Loban (1976), and O'Donnell (1967) report that children's language units, both oral and written, become longer, more flexible and contain an increasing number of subordinators, qualifiers and sentence embeddedness. Concern for the needs of the reader, awareness of the aud-

ience, so necessary for effective communication,develops gradually as well (Barritt and Kroll, 1978). Such developmental indicators in language growth serve as a theoretical framework for viewing children's written compositions.

Recent work in discourse analysis has described elements which make texts cohesive (Halliday and Hassan, 1976) and also has provided structural charactistics of narratives and exposition (Applebee, 1978; Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Stein and Glenn, 1979; Meyer, 1977; Kintsch, 1974). These studies suggest research tools which can be used to examine written compositions.

The purpose of this study was to identify characteristics of young children's written compositions which might be used to indicate growth patterns. The assumptions underlying the study were:

1. Learning to write is a developmental process and the beginner's efforts cannot be evaluated according to adult standards (McCaig 1972).
2. Growth in writing competence occurs slowly as children become aware of the conventions of print (Clay, 1972).
3. As in language acquisition, children's writing indicates that as new forms are tried, skills which seem to have been mastered may be lost for a short time (Clay,1972; McCaig, 1980).

Four hundred eighty-two written compositions were collected from children in grades 1-3, including gifted as well as students in special

remedial programs. The samples were examined by two teams of teacher-researchers and placed, regardless of grade level on a continuum of sophistication. Four growth strands were identified: readiness, sentence, description and beginning discourse. Observations of the patterns reflected in each of these strands will be discussed.

The readiness strand was indicative of the beginning writer who was becoming aware of the conventions of print. Children seemed to be developing the concept that oral language can be translated into scribbles and garbles to convey a message. They began to dictate ideas, to use spaces between words, to write inventories of words and letters that they knew and to become concerned about the aesthetics of their writing.

In the sentence strand, the children began to string several words together to form their own sentences. Characteristics suggested that an awareness that writing communicated ideas was being developed. Frequent use of repetitive patterns, a rigid structure in which only one or two words are changed in each subsequent sentence was also observed.

The description strand indicated that children were making a transition from single sentences to a series of sentences which describe a picture, an object or an experience. In this strand, the sentences all related to one central idea or topic; however, sentences could usually be rearranged without affecting the meaning. Samples lacked movement of thought or cohesion.

At the beginning discourse strand, children retold in writing, stories

or personal experiences. They showed movement of time through the use of verb tense and through the chronological ordering of ideas. More punctuation was used, possibly indicating that children were becoming aware of the needs of the reader. In the samples, clear distinctions of narrative and exposition became evident. These seemed to reflect the stimulus for writing that had been provided by the teachers. Although both types of prose displayed similar characteristics, some features were unique, i.e. stories showed evidence of plot structure while exposition samples exhibited a controlling idea. Characteristics in beginning discourse included five elements indicating growth in the development of cohesive writing and each will be discussed.

Sentences increased in length and variety. Writing samples indicated sentence development as they changed from the short agent-verb-object patterns to complex sentences with several embedded ideas. As the children seemed to take the responsibility for linking ideas for the reader, they showed an increase in the ability to make logical relationships between and within sentences. At first this was indicated by linking each idea unit with "and", but as the writer became more sophisticated, other words were employed to indicate sequence. The reference necessary to make pronouns clear was often vague or incorrect. This seemed to be followed by an increase in words showing movement across time and in the use of conjunctions to connect ideas such as relationships of cause and effect, "because" and contrary ideas, "yet".

Not only was there an increase in concern for logical relationships, but also an increase in descriptive language was indicated. As the children

seemed to gain fluency, ideas became more explicit through the use of supporting details, descriptive adjectives and adverbs.

A fourth element in the beginning composition strand that seemed to develop was the use of structure, beginning with the retelling of an experience or the retelling of a story. The samples indicated an increase in the use of narrative parts, character development, conflict, event structure and resolution of conflict. Expository compositions showed an increas in the ability to present a controlling idea with supporting details.

The fifth element showing growth was in the recognition of the needs of the reader--audience awareness. The children gradually seemed to take into consideration the reader's point of view and no longer made the assumptions that all readers share their thoughts and experiences. This was indicated through the increased use of punctuation, capitalization, graphic indicators such as all capitals, "LOOK", or underlining and dashes to show emphasis. The samples also indicated an awareness of audience through the use of humor, expression of feelings, dialogue and character description.

This study attempted to provide a developmental view of the characteristics of young children's writing. While a sequence of patterns and growth strands were indicated, these patterns did not appear to occur in smooth transitions. This observation supports the work of Clay, Graves and other language researchers which suggests that as children experiment with new forms, they find themselves trying to control more than they can manage or monitor. Teacher awareness of the importance of

errors to growth in writing should help create a classroom atmosphere that encourages risk-taking and experimentation. These growth strands can serve as guidelines for teachers as they examine children's compositions over a period of time and as they communicate with administrators and parents about written language growth.

READINESS	.Scribble	.Trace-copy	.Inventory	.Word-space	
SENTENCE	.Single sentence or meaning unit	.Unconnected sentences	.Repetitive patterns	.Awareness of connections	
DESCRIPTION	.Central idea	.No movement (time sequence)	.Describes object, person	.describes experience	
BEGINNING DISCOURSE	Characteristics are evident in both narrative and expressive writing				
Sentence Variety	.Short sentences (little variation from agent-verb-object pattern)	.Sentence length increase (increase in modification)	.Complex sentence (increase use of phrases and dependent clauses)		
Logical Relationships (cohesion)	.Sentences connected by "and" .Excessive use of "then" .Unclear use of pronoun reference	.Most sentences deal with common subject .Use of words to indicate sequence .Selective use of "and"	.Awareness of sequence of ideas .Shows movement through time words .Coordinated predicate .Clearer use of pronouns .Use of "but" to express contrary thought	.Begins to use "when", "next", "first", "also", to connect ideas .Evidence of coordinated predicates, phrases	.Shows cause and effect relationships .Use of text to express contrary thoughts .Words or phrases to indicate change in action or ideas, "Suddenly the car"
Descriptive Language	.Limited to common adjectives	.Increase of details in story or experience	.Occasional use of descriptive adjectives i.e. "slippery", "stormy" .Some details to explain event or idea	.Use of mood words .Begins to be aware of words choice .Use of simile .Character description	
Structure Of Discourse	.Retells an experience or story with one or more story parts	.Generated story with one or more story parts .May borrow ideas from experience or another story	.Evidence of story structure with characters, problem, action and resolution .Becomes aware of controlling idea .Evidence of supporting details		
Audience Awareness, Mechanics	.Some use of capitalization	.Fair spelling of basic words .Begins to recognize the formality of written language	.Some use of dialogue .May use quotation marks .Begins to edit for punctuation	.Attempt to communicate with reader (questions) .Expression of feelings .Humor .Begins to express value system .Becomes more explicit	.Is able to edit for punctuation, spelling, agreement .Begins self editing .Good spelling of basic words .Expresses feelings through another character .Begin to use writing process independently

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